

Davis, G. & Ryder, G. (2015). Exploring leadership in early childhood practice: summary of original research.

This is a summary of the research undertaken for this project. The results of our research project are presented within the book 'Leading in Early Childhood', published by Sage, 2016, and are being prepared for presentation in early childhood journal articles and at academic and practitioner conferences.

Title:

Exploring leadership in early childhood practice

Aim:

The overall aim of the project was to explore current experiences of leadership by people who work within early childhood practice settings. We were interested in the views of practitioners from a range of roles, some of whom were able to provide specific parental or family perspectives. Within this aim, the researchers aimed to:

- identify the range of leadership practice which is taking place in early childhood settings
- celebrate effective practice
- identify opportunities to further develop leadership in early childhood practice
- make recommendations for leadership practice in early childhood

Research question:

In what ways do early childhood practitioners demonstrate leadership within their roles in early childhood settings?

Participants:

Participants were early childhood practitioners within early childhood settings or parent consultants working with parents of young children. All twenty five (25) participants were aged 18 years or over and able to provide voluntary informed consent. The participants worked with children from newborn to age 8.

While we approached a range of settings, organisations and practitioners, only females participated in this project. We did not assess the number of men working in settings approached by us. The participants are summarised in figure 1.

Methods:

Sampling: Convenience sampling was used for initial recruitment of participants. We approached settings, organisations and practitioners who were known to us through our work with settings and students, or recommended to us by practitioners, students, managers and placement co-ordinators. Initial contact was by email or face to face. Some snowballing of the sample occurred, through recruitment of further participants from the

initial convenience sample. We sought to include a range of practitioners, a range of roles, and a range of settings. These were mainly, although not exclusively, from settings across the UK (see figure 1). Snowballing meant that some participants were located in Europe, or travelled with their role between the UK and other countries. The email invited participants to get in touch with researchers to express their willingness to take part in the project. If there was no response, no follow up occurred. Those participants who responded were sent a participant information sheet and consent form and an interview or focus group meeting was arranged.

Figure 1. Summary of participants:

<i>Qualification level</i>
NVQ Level 2; NVQ Level 3; Foundation degree level 4/5; Bachelors degree level 6; Masters degree Level 7.
Participants identified additional qualifications relevant to their roles. These included Early Years Professional Status; NVQ level 4 management; Qualified Teacher Status.
<i>Roles of practitioners</i>
Level 2 practitioners; early years educators; senior early years educators; early years teachers; nursery teachers; reception teachers; childminders; nannies; maternity nurse trainer; nursery teaching assistant; parent consultants; setting managers; room leaders; team leaders; key persons; play workers; support workers.
<i>Geographic location of settings</i>
UK – Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk, Nottinghamshire, Somerset, Devon, Greater London, Scotland.
Channel Islands
Europe: France
Travel internationally on cruise ship or with families.
<i>Types of setting</i>
After school clubs; community playgroups; private nurseries; Steiner setting; Montessori setting; Forest School setting; Reggio Emilia setting; Reception class; independent school; nursery school; own home; family home, cruise ship.

Research ethics: Best practice in ethical research was used following the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011). Ethical approval was obtained from Anglia Ruskin University Faculty Research Ethics Panel.

Data collection: Data collection occurred through informal, semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews and focus groups. Interviews were held either face to face or by telephone. Face to face interviews were arranged at a mutually convenient time and place. Individual interviews were arranged where this was feasible, focus groups were held when participants preferred to share their experiences in this way. All focus groups were face to face meetings. At the start of data collection we made explicit, both verbally and in the printed participant information sheet, that participation in the project was entirely voluntary and that participants would not be identified by name. Pseudonyms have been used to present extracts from the data. No personal details were collected.

Data analysis: Thematic analysis of the data enabled us to identify common themes across the data. Opportunities for and experiences of leadership within particular roles provided data to evidence leadership practice within the early childhood community.

Results:

The results of our research project are presented within the book 'Leading in Early Childhood', published by Sage, 2016, and are being prepared for presentation in early childhood journal articles and at academic and practitioner conferences.

Summary of findings:

- Early childhood practitioners work in diverse settings in the UK and abroad, and in diverse roles. These include sole responsibility for a child within a family or within a home setting; working in a consultancy role; responsibility for specific children within a room or setting; team leadership responsibilities; mentor roles; developing novice and experienced practitioners; specific responsibility for emotional and social development of a child as their key person; leadership of practice within and across settings.
- Opportunities to enact leadership are evident within a wide range of early childhood roles and settings. These include mentoring and supporting volunteers, agency staff and other practitioners; working as part of a team within the setting and with other types of early childhood providers; acting as agents of change; using new ideas and initiatives to improve and expand provision.
- Confidence in knowledge and in role enables the practitioner to make use of leadership to positively influence early childhood practice on an internal and external level.
- Values are important in early childhood settings, and are enacted through effective leadership. This includes leadership with children, families, other early childhood practitioners and other professionals. Valuing people includes respecting their autonomy and working to support inclusion and diversity.
- Early childhood practitioners face a range of challenges and barriers to effective leadership. They meet these challenges by working collaboratively, liaising with other professionals and services, communicating effectively, setting clear goals, valuing the child, the family and the workforce and recognising the importance of their role in supporting positive outcomes for children and their families.

- Professional development is important for the early childhood workforce. This includes opportunities for formal and informal support with their specific role, opportunities for mentorship and networking, formal development opportunities, and engaging with research to improve and advance practice.
- Early childhood practitioners develop emotional resilience to support their professional work with children and families. They use reflective practice to recognise existing effective practice, and to plan change to further develop practice. They work on safeguarding themselves as professionals and recognise issues pertaining to negative forms of practice.
- Professional identity is clearly evident within the early childhood workforce. Early childhood professionals are important in positively supporting learning and development and educating children and families holistically. The importance of the role is not always recognised by families or by other professionals. Early childhood professionals acknowledge this and act as ambassadors for the early childhood workforce, detailing the nature of their roles and role modelling effective professional practice.

Available through Anglia Ruskin Research Online (ARRO)

December 2015